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SUBSTANTIVE QUESTIONS

Integration of United Nations information centres with field offices of the United Nations Development Programme

Report of the Secretary-General

I. INTRODUCTION

1. In paragraph 8 of its resolution 48/44 B of 10 December 1993, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to report to the Committee on Information at its sixteenth session for the purpose of evaluating the need for any subsequent integration, the results of the current trial of integrating 18 United Nations information centres with field offices of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) as mentioned in the report of the Secretary-General (A/AC.198/1993/7). The Secretary-General should also report on the views of the host countries, bearing in mind the concerns of Member States that the integration of the United Nations information centres with the United Nations offices could adversely affect their functions in the developing countries. The present report was prepared on the basis of a survey of the integrated United Nations information centres conducted by the Department of Public Information of the Secretariat. As requested by the General Assembly, the report also contains the views of those host countries of the integrated centres that responded to the Secretariat by the time of the completion of this report.

2. In his report on the integration of United Nations information centres with other United Nations offices, while maintaining the functional autonomy of the United Nations information centres, submitted to the Committee on Information at its fifteenth session, the Secretary-General stipulated that the experience with integration would be evaluated after a trial period of one year, during which time the terms of integration would be refined through exchanges between the field offices and Headquarters (A/AC.198/1993/7, para. 17).

3. In the preparation of the present report, careful consideration has been given to the objectives behind the decision of the Secretary-General, in March 1992, that in the interest of improved productivity and economies of scale, as well as presenting a unified United Nations image, ... wherever feasible, the operations of United Nations information centres should be integrated with those of UNDP field offices (A/AC.198/1993/7, para. 3). With this in mind, particular attention has been given to the achievement of the purposes and objectives outlined by the Secretary-General with regard to the integration process, namely:

(a) To present a unified image of the United Nations in the field;

(b) To enhance information activities in all areas, including development issues;

(c) To achieve economies through sharing of common services.

In addition, the integration of the operations of the field offices was designed to facilitate inter-agency coordination and avoid duplication.

II. OVERVIEW

4. The integration exercise was originally intended to involve 18 information centres in locations where the Resident Representatives of UNDP already serve concurrently as full-time directors of the United Nations information centres. Those centres are located at Algiers, Ankara, Antananarivo, Asunción, Bucharest, Cairo, Colombo, Kabul, Kathmandu, Kinshasa, La Paz, Lomé, Managua, Maseru, Monrovia, Panama City, San Salvador and Yangon. However, owing to the prevailing conditions in two host countries, two United Nations information centres were excluded from this exercise: the centre at Monrovia is currently not operational, while the public information activities of the centre at San Salvador have been temporarily shifted to the information service of the United Nations Observer Mission in El Salvador. On 3 August 1992, joint letters by the Director of the Information Centres Division of the Department of Public Information and the Director of the Division of Public Affairs of UNDP were sent to the 16 officials in the field outlining policies and guidelines for the integrated operation. On 16 July 1993, the Assistant Secretary-General for Public Information asked the Permanent Representatives of the host Governments concerned to submit the views of their Government on the integration exercise. On 28 January 1994, the Assistant Secretary-General for Public Information sent a second letter to the Permanent Representatives concerned.

5. On 1 November 1993, the Department sent a questionnaire to the directors of 16 integrated United Nations information centres, accompanied by a letter from the senior officers of both the Department of Public Information and UNDP, explaining the mandate for the survey and the need for an evaluation. In accordance with the purposes and objectives of the integration exercise, the self-administered questionnaire was designed mainly to obtain information on the results of the integration, its effects on possible administrative changes and the streamlining of operations, practical aspects of the planning and implementation of information activities and strategies, the status of any

sharing of common services and subsequent cost savings, as well as the enhancement of inter-agency cooperation in the public information activities in the host country.

6. Ten of the United Nations information centres surveyed share premises with UNDP, while six maintain separate premises.

III. SURVEY RESULTS

7. In their responses, 12 Directors indicated that, as a result of integration, inter-agency cooperation for public information activities had been enhanced, the unified presence of the United Nations in the host country had been strengthened, and information activities in all areas, including those relating to development issues, were carried out in a more effective manner.

8. Nine Directors responded that the integration of the two offices had resulted in additional responsibilities for the incumbents, while ensuring a more consolidated approach to public information activities as a whole. Among the benefits of the integration, the Directors noted the greater efficiency of the operation that had not only resulted in better cooperation between UNDP and the Department in the field, but had also led to improved coordination of information activities among all members of the United Nations system represented in the host country.

9. In the area of sharing of equipment and common services, all respondents agreed that the integration had resulted in the more efficient use of limited resources. So far, savings have been generated through the use of joint pouch, telephone and facsimile services; cost sharing for the maintenance of premises, including security, in duty stations where the two offices share the premises; and joint use of vehicles. It was anticipated that additional savings could be generated in the future, after other areas of possible cost sharing have been identified.

10. Regarding the day-to-day operations of the United Nations information centres, most respondents emphasized the crucial role played by the National Information Officers or the Information Assistants, whose professional experience, in-depth knowledge of the local conditions and easy access to the media in the host country made them indispensable for the efficient functioning of the integrated centres. The respondents also pointed out that the integration had led to improved teamwork among staff members of both offices, particularly with regard to promotional activities for specific projects and joint action on local or national information campaigns to promote major issues before the United Nations.

IV. VIEWS OF HOST GOVERNMENTS

11. In accordance with the provisions of General Assembly resolution 48/44 B, the Department of Public Information sought to obtain the views of the Governments concerned on the integration exercise. As noted in paragraph 4 above, two communications to this effect have been sent. As at 29 March 1994,

only four Governments have responded. One Government considered the role of the United Nations information centre too important for integration with the field office of UNDP, which had its own major assignments in that country, and expressed concern that the integration, even if functional autonomy of the centre was maintained, would adversely affect the activities of the United Nations information centre. In the light of the needs of the host country, the independent operation of the two offices needed to continue.

12. Another Government welcomed the integration exercise in its country and suggested that the consolidation of the operations of the United Nations information centre with all United Nations organizations and programmes represented in the country in common premises could evolve into a regional office also covering the United Nations activities for neighbouring countries.

13. Yet another Government noted that the integration exercise seemed to indicate the intention to formalize the situation in the countries where, for various reasons, staff members of the Department of Public Information were no longer being appointed as directors of the information centres. That Government believed that this situation could be temporarily accepted, until more viable possibilities for integration have been identified, in accordance with host country agreements between the United Nations and the Governments concerned.

14. Another Government emphasized the need to increase the staff resources allocated to the information centre located in its country and expressed concern about the decreasing level of operational funding for its activities. It commended the work performed by the information centre, but noted that it could become even more effective if it received a higher level of financial support.

V. CONCLUSIONS

15. The results of the current trial of integrating a number of United Nations information centres with field offices of UNDP have to be seen in the light of both the 1990 Agreement between UNDP and the Department of Public Information on cooperation in the field and the decision of the Secretary-General of March 1992 on the integration exercise. While the focus of the integration at this stage is on information centres where the Resident Representative of UNDP serves concurrently as full-time director of the United Nations information centre, the different mandates of the United Nations information centres and the field offices of UNDP have been respected and maintained in all cases.

16. The survey among Resident Representatives of UNDP serving concurrently as centre directors provides evidence of a further strengthening of cooperation between the Department and UNDP. In addition to an improved unified image of the United Nations in the field, progress has been made with regard to a more effective inter-agency cooperation in public information activities in the host countries concerned on all issues of interest to the United Nations, including those related to development.

17. The integrated information centres continue to report and are accountable to the Department of Public Information in the exercise of their functions.

18. The results of the evaluation show that one area requiring further efforts is that of adequate and regular briefings for Resident Representatives of UNDP serving concurrently as full-time centre directors. While the situation varies with specific regions, it is imperative that those Resident Representatives receive briefings both upon appointment and on a regular and continuous basis thereafter. In addition, efforts are being made to develop the existing briefing mechanism into a continuing two-way dialogue on the implementation of information programmes mandated by the General Assembly and requiring special attention. The Administrator of UNDP and the Assistant Secretary-General for Public Information are in regular consultation on the integration process of United Nations information centres with field offices of UNDP and have jointly written to UNDP Resident Representatives serving as directors of United Nations information centres to ensure effective and thorough briefings on public information matters.

19. Another aspect of those briefings should be to make newly appointed Resident Representatives aware that, with regard to United Nations information centres, integration must respect the prevailing rules and regulations of the United Nations Secretariat pertaining to budgetary, personnel and other administrative matters and that United Nations information centres have to adhere to the specific United Nations rules and regulations on matters coming under the responsibility of the Office of Human Resources Management and the Office of Programme Planning, Budget and Finance.

20. Based on the present evaluation, and taking into consideration the views of the Committee on Information, the Secretary-General intends to continue the integration experience, whenever feasible, in accordance with his stated objectives: to present a unified image of the United Nations in the field; to enhance information activities in all areas, including development issues; and to achieve possible economies through sharing of common services.